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Iowa has 'Great Places'

New program a creative way develop ideas, add attractions and boost tourism.

Iowa is launching a coordinated initiative to turn its "great places" into a magnet for tourists. It is an idea for other Midwestern states to keep an eye on.

Gov. Tom Vilsack announced the Iowa Great Places program in January, but it's only now beginning to roll. The plan is for state officials to meet with Iowans in every part of the state, hear ideas on developing local projects and points of interest, big or small, and then marshal whatever's necessary to turn the practical into reality.

Anita Walker, head of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, will lead the effort. She said recently a "team of coaches" will listen to the "hopes, dreams and visions" of local individuals, groups or governments. The coaches will then go to the 18 state agencies involved in the effort to find out how the possibilities can be turned into realities.

The agencies involved range from the Departments of Transportation and Natural Resources to the Board of Regents and Workforce Development. The ultimate success of the program will be in whether Walker can make what she has called "a true partner(ship) with the people of Iowa" work as planned. If it does, this collaboration of local and state leaders, which could include the key factor of identifying funding for projects, might pay off.

Three pilot projects will be chosen soon. Meanwhile, western Iowans with ideas can express them to Walker and other officials at the Community Theater Playhouse in Spencer at 4 p.m. Wednesday, the Western Historic Trails Center, Council Bluffs, at 4:15 p.m. Thursday, or at the Martin Ballroom in Sioux City at 4 p.m. June 9.

Turning Iowa into a tourism mecca won't be the easiest task in the world. Its beauties are subtle and its attractions whisper rather than shout. But Vilsack's Iowa Great Places could move the state closer to that goal.

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